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ABSTRACT

The author contends that with all the force of religious revelation, a self-evident truth has erupted into professional consciousness: the earth and its treasures are finite. And from that long since obvious proposition spring revolutionary consequences. It is suggested that the reason this obvious truth is just recently becoming a startling revelation is because we are approaching the limits of the earth's finitudes. This concept is oversimplified and overstated by the author in order to more sharply focus on the challenges to be faced. Although further economic growth is possible, it is suggested that the growth rate must of necessity slow down. Examples are cited of the ways in which this new state of affairs has begun to affect professionals and thus to penetrate their consciousness. Also cited are a number of areas such as the welfare system and the tax structure about which general public beliefs are myths. It is concluded that a necessary way for professionals to serve their clients is to become actively involved in the political arena. (BW)

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POVERTY, PROFESSIONALISM AND POLITICS

by

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With all the force of religious revelation, a self-evident truth has erupted into professional consciousness: the earth and its treasures are finite. And from that long since obvious proposition spring revolutionary consequences.

If so obviously true and for so long obvious, why should it have so startling an impact? Because, for the first time in our history, we are beginning to approach the limits of that finitude.

So long as this country had what appeared to be an endless frontier, the ravaged land we abandoned mattered little to us. So long as the marvels of technology promised limitless productivity, the growth of world population was in keeping with the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply. So long as we thought that there was more of everything to be had, poverty could be corrected, in principle at least, without taking from the haves to give to the have-nots.

Now we begin to be aware of the moving finger. It is still true that the green revolution could permit us to feed a world population several fold larger than its present aggregate mass ( ). If we were to use Dutch standards of cultivation and nutrition, the arable land mass of the world would support a population of perhaps 8 billion people; if we use Japanese standards, of perhaps 20 billion. But what has not been reckoned with, as we dazzled ourselves with our technological virtuosity, is the garbage disposal problem. Whether measured by air pollution, water defilement or radioactive wastes, the limiting condition is not producing goods; it is the present inability of the ecosystem to recycle the artifacts of civilization. The short-run threat to Space Ship Earth is not the birth of more Chinese or Indians or Africans, but the birth of more Americans and West Europeans, each of whom consumes resources and creates wastes at many times the rate of the citizens of underdeveloped countries ( ). Why is the

recognition of this relationship revolutionary? Because it is we who must change, not merely others. Because it implies that, even at zero population growth, a condition not likely soon to be attained, the world's resources cannot be expanded sufficiently to attain dignity for all without halting conspicuous consumption. Conventional economic wisdom had held that growth in the gross national product would enable us to continue to improve living standards without invading the prerogatives of the privileged. How different the world we now encounter!

My thesis is oversimplified and overstated in order to sharpen my focus on the challenge that we face. I do not suggest that we have reached the point where no further economic growth is possible. That is far from true. I do not suggest that further technological development will not dissipate some of our present waste disposal problems; there is no reason to doubt that the scientific ingenuity that we have devoted to making war, if applied to virtuous ends, could enable more of us to make love. But even if the economic pie can still be made somewhat larger than it is now, my thesis remains valid; namely, that, of necessity, we are about to enter a period of slower growth and that the resulting social pressures will force a redistribution of wealth because our capacity for generating new wealth will not suffice to meet all competing needs.

I propose to pursue this theme by citing examples of the ways in which this new state of affairs has begun to affect professionals and thus to penetrate their consciousness. These first examples are far from the most significant for the national welfare but as they affect the "welfare" of professionals, they bring our own responses to center stage. I will next examine how Americans are being betrayed by false solutions cleverly engineered to offer the appearance of change but actually designed to reinforce the status quo. Finally, I will conclude by stressing the interrelationship between human services and professional responsibility.

The issues that have emerged into professional consciousness are as varied as our specialties. Consider scientific research workers. In the period from the end of World War II to the mid-1960's, federal allocations for research and development expanded at an exponential rate ( ). Indeed, grim humorists have calculated that, had the process continued, in another generation the entire G.N.P. would have been consumed by Science! Surely rational men should have been able to recognize that the cornucopia was not inexhaustible, but when the decline in appropriations began, the cries of anguish echoed down laboratory corridors. Some statesmen of science had warned that a limit was being approached; few listened to the Cassandras so long as the day of reckoning seemed postponable.

During the period of continuous growth, little thought was given to the formulation of an explicit national science policy; almost everything that was worth doing was supportable. We did not have to make choices between basic and applied research, between organic chemistry and anaesthesia, between health research and space research. I do not mean to suggest that choices were not being made even then, but the determinations were made by a scientific elite who were able to support a promising new development without discontinuing a traditional field of inquiry. Now, with the total science budget in real dollars actually declining or at best fixed, a decision that a new field merits major support has the immediate consequence that an equivalent amount must be subtracted from a previously supported but now less favored discipline. Apart from the jockeying for position that results, such a decision requires a reasoned basis, a basis other than scientific purity (the need to climb the mountain because it's there). Yet, there are dangers to the setting of priorities on the grounds of obvious relevance alone; a preoccupation with immediate results may stifle the far greater benefits that can flow from a research area apparently remote from

current crises. Once it is clear that we cannot support everything, we have to have a basis for deciding what we will support. Having avoided formulating a general solution to this problem during the fat years, we are at a great disadvantage in fashioning policy solutions under the gun of budget cuts.

Consider a second example from the academic campus. Universities have grown at enormous rate. In 1958 there were only ten institutions with an enrollment of more than 20,000 students; they accounted for only 8 percent of the national student body. Eleven years later, there were 65 of that size (of which 26 held more than 30,000 students) accommodating more than a quarter of the total student population ( ). But is bigger really better? A persuasive case can be made that growth beyond a critical size (in the range of 3,000 to 9,000 students) is dysfunctional because of the disproportionate multiplication of administrative structures, decrease in personal interactions and the resulting alienation of students and faculty in an institution that has lost human proportions ( ). But what is an optimal size? The same question can be raised for the modern teaching hospital with its proliferation of specialty services, its problems of communication and its lack of awareness of the relation between the complex disease problems it manages and the general health of the community it is meant to serve ( ).

In university and in hospital, institutions I choose because I am familiar with both, the approaching moritorium on building and the worsening budget crises pose issues none of us had to face during the past two decades. If a field not represented within the institution is judged to be a major growth point for new knowledge, then how does the dean or the executive faculty go about providing funds and space for the new department when existing departments hold a lien on available resources? Clearly, to

start department Z, one has to cut departments X and Y, chosen because they are no longer productive, or else reduce all departments A through Y on a proportionate basis. The first solution requires hard judgments; the second postpones judgment making for a doctrine of "fairness" that avoids the difficult but inevitable task of assessing relative contribution. Areas of science do play out. It does not require intimate knowledge of the university to write the scenario for the political infighting which develops as each department prepares to resist encroachment on its own turf, a demesne to which it has primary loyalty rather than to the domain of the university as a whole ( ).

The same holds true for welfare agencies within a United Chest; which agency executive or trustee has stepped forward to propose a reduction in his own budget when the need to support a new black community agency becomes evident? As patterns of human needs change (for example, as the result of prevention or cure of a previously crippling disease), a naive citizen might expect to see categorical agencies close their doors to be replaced by others designed for new problems. Instead, what he observes are obsolescent agencies in search of a "need." Self-perpetuation has replaced service. This illustrates in particularly sharp fashion what is a prevailing professional dilemma: a growing tendency with time for professional organizations (whether of doctors or nurses, social workers or teachers) to substitute self-serving for the public good they originally functioned to guarantee. Standards, initially fashioned to guard against charlatanism, all too readily become a defense of traditional practice against the unsettling threat of change. An A.P.A., whether psychological or psychiatric, begins to think that what is good for General Motors is good for the nation ( ).

I begin with this unpleasant truth about ourselves as a necessary step in coming to grips with special interests which do not profess to

serve the general good. If we behave this way, shall we be surprised that suburbanites resist the taxation needed to support the inner city? They do what we do (and what some of us who are suburbanites join them in doing); namely, to develop an elaborate rationale that justifies the protection of enclaves of privilege in the name of noble goals.

Let us turn from these narrow professional myths to issues more central to human welfare. We fight wars, not for aggrandizement or protection of markets, but to "defend democracy." To lessen our burden of guilt for murder, we dehumanize the "enemy" into a pseudospecies ( ). We resist welfare budgets, not because we resent the cost of helping the down-trodden, but to "curb cheats and chislers." We argue against a guaranteed annual income, not because it would reduce our own, but to protect the cash incentive "essential" to a productive economy. To lessen our burden of guilt, we invent myths, myths that, on the one hand, dehumanize the poor, myths that, on the other, allege that income is being redistributed for their benefit.

Americans believe that welfare families are loaded with kids and have kids to get more money. In fact, the typical welfare family has a mother and three children; since 1967, its birth rate (like that of the general population) has been dropping. Americans believe that welfare families are black; in fact, the largest racial group is white. Americans believe that welfare recipients buy Cadillacs and go to Florida on tax money; in fact, welfare families in all but four states are kept on a dole well below poverty standards. Americans believe welfare people are cheats; in fact, despite repeated efforts to detect fraud, efforts that dissipate public funds, cheating occurs in less than four tenths of one percent of the total case load nationally. Each of you can make his own estimate of the cheating on defense contracts, state psyrolls and income tax returns. Just

what should we call the I.T.T. contribution to the Republican National Convention? Americans believe that once on welfare, always on welfare; in fact, the average family has been on the rolls for less than 23 months. Americans believe that welfare rolls are full of loafers; in fact, less than one percent are able-bodied unemployed males, 55 percent are children, 25 percent aged or permanently disabled and 19 percent women, most of them family heads, four out of five eager to work if work and child care arrangements were available ( ). The enormous discrepancy between belief and reality defines the magnitude of the task facing advocates of human welfare and, if you will, provides a measure of our failure in the public arena.

No less pernicious are the myths surrounding federal, state and municipal tax structures ( ). Taxes are viewed solely as a means for generating the revenue needed to maintain essential governmental services. Almost never are they understood for what they are: instruments of public policy based on implicit values. And we professionals, no less than the general public, have been gulled by public officials adroit in the manipulation of symbols into the belief that we have a progressive tax structure. The facts are strikingly different.

Consider the social security tax; packaged as insurance, it now brings the federal government $64 billion in revenue ( ), two thirds as much as individual income tax returns ($95 billion) and almost twice as much as corporate income tax ($36 billion). Not only is it not progressive, it is regressive in concept; not soak the rich, but soak the poor. The rate (5.2 percent) is the "same" for all wage earners but only up to $9,000 annual base. Thus, the more money earned, the lower the actual percentage paid in social security tax. If federal, state and local taxes are summed, those in the $2,000 to $4,000 income range are taxed at the same rate (27 percent) as those in the $10,000 to $15,000 bracket ( ). In 1969, 574 Americans

with incomes exceeding $200,000 paid no taxes ( ). In 1970, after tax "reform" aimed at the 18,000 wealthy individuals in privileged sanctuaries, they paid at an overall rate of 4 percent and there remained 1,338 with incomes in excess of $50,000 who enjoyed the status of non-taxpayers ( )! Equally discriminatory but less obvious are the subsidies buried within the tax structure. Mortgage and property tax exemptions available to the middle and upper income home owner subsidize his housing in an amount 3 1/2 times the federal investment in public housing projects ( ). Again, agricultural subsidies (two thirds of which accrue to the upper one sixth of farm owners) exceed the cost of all federal, state and local welfare expenditures ( ). And how shall we classify the $5 billion the public pays for oil import quotas without even reckoning the cost of the oil depletion allowances? We are a welfare state, a welfare state for the wealthy. There are welfare chislers: Lockheed and Penn Central are their names, corporations bailed out by a government solicitous, no doubt, of the widows and orphans among their stockholders

Myth making is not limited to the rationalization of tax policy. It is applied with equal skill to the process governing expenditure of public funds. The President, in an effort to obscure the racism of his stand against bussing, announced a $1.5 billion program for compensatory education. Analysis of his proposal reveals nothing more than a relabeling of funds already allocated so as to imply the availability of new money that isn't there. Similar deliberate obfuscation surrounds the debate on a guaranteed annual income. By appearing to accept the radical view while turning it into its opposite by advocating levels of support well below that now incorporated into the welfare system, Republicans and conservative Democrats alike debase the meaning of language and degrade public understanding.

Slogans have always been cheap. They appeal to both political parties. Remember Johnson's "war against poverty?" It deserves to be remembered for the role professionals played in it. The con game then was "interrupting the cycle of poverty." Think about that phrase. In bald terms, it meant that the poor were poor, not for so simple-minded a reason as lack of money, but because of their behavior. Society's victims were held responsible for their own victimization ( ). The poor were invested with new labels: "culturally impoverished"... "matriarchal"... "disadvantaged"... They were proferred professional "help." Redeemers were not lacking--at a consultation fee. Money was transferred--but into professional pockets. The poor remain poor; they still need money.

The Administration acknowledges a crisis in health care, proclaims "bold new initiatives" but is careful to avoid tampering with the privileges of private medical practitioners. Not only are the funds proposed for expanding medical education and for establishing health maintenance organizations grossly inadequate, but federal policy conspicuously fails to address the need for a health care system ( ). Until this issue is faced, nothing will increase except medical costs. Some of us thought we had won a major victory when Medicare was established, but the A.M.A. was the real winner. By incorporating Medicare benefits into the traditional fee-for-service payment scheme, it reinforced the most dysfunctional elements in episodic medical care. Now A.M.A. and Administration are allied in attacking basic medical research, as if the diversion of the 2 percent of the total medical costs now invested in research back into the service budget would make a perceptible difference in national health indices. Its one clear consequence will be a tragic reduction in the probability of discovering how to treat and prevent the major causes of death: heart disease, cancer and stroke, of discovering how to treat and prevent the major causes of suffering: mental disease and drug addiction.

If my examples seem to have strayed over the map, ranging as they do from competition for space and funds between agencies, through inequities in tax policy, to income maintenance and health care, they have been chosen to illustrate the necessity of uniting in a crusade for human services in place of our customary categorical campaigns. It is an absurdity to demand funds for community mental health without at the same time supporting comprehensive health care, effective public schools and income maintenance. It is an absurdity to support taxes for public services without at the same time demanding reform of the tax structure that worsens the inequities it purports to correct. It is an absurdity to fight for a share of the federal budget without at the same time demanding an end to war and preparing for war. What is spent for guns will not be spent for butter.

If ever it was in doubt, it is now clear that we cannot escape active involvement in the political arena if we are to serve our clients. Those who daily confront the victims of social injustice have an inescapable responsibility to bring the meaning of that injustice to public attention whatever the personal cost involved. Narrow professionalism is a perversion of the ends our professions were created to serve. What matters is human welfare.